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ABSTRACT

National information policy should recognize the depository library system as the public's natural and traditional access point to Federal information. Despite efforts of agencies, Congress, and national commissions to improve access, citizens are still confused and frustrated in obtaining public Federal information. Certain issues of public policy and administrative laxness and indecision impairing depository libraries' effectiveness should be resolved in the interest of public information accessibility. Congress should view these libraries as a link with its constituents and enhance the information services. Cast in a new role, depository libraries could not only provide publications, but also refer inquirers to other Federal information resources. (Author/CMV)

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National Policy and Access to Federal Information-- A View from the Hinterlands

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Summary

FEDERAL INFORMATION AND ACCESSIBILITY

The Federal information establishment is a complex of people and machines, documents and publications, records and files hardly deserving the name organization. Estimated to cost 20 billion dollars, agencies produce 10 billion sheets of paper which can annually fill 4½ million cubic feet of space.[1] Expenditures for automation of agency information systems alone reached approximately 3.3 billion in 1975.[2] Recent years have also witnessed increases in the volume and quality of information services provided by Federal agencies to their constituencies and to the public in areas of bibliographic data bases, abstracting and indexing publications and mechanized search services, development of numeric data bases, and programs for citizens information services and transfer of government-funded technology to industry.

For the citizen-information seeker, the enormousness and complexity of Federal information contributes to bewilderment and frustration. The accessing of Federal information is neither effortless, convenient, nor comprehensible. It is, in fact, confusing. As a result, people develop many means, some better than others, to procure information. Often these means are inequitable. For example, people seeking Federal information in Washington, D.C. or other metropolitan areas with Federal

regional offices enjoy greater advantages not shared by those in small communities and rural areas.

User studies in information science have taught us a great deal about information-gathering habits. People develop many methods for obtaining information. In fact, there are probably as many methods as there are people. Some are simply informal, involving the use of the telephone or mail. But these are most effective when one knows who to contact. Often scientists, academics, and businessman develop "invisible colleges"--a buddy system with gatekeepers and personal contacts who direct and refer request through organizations including the Federal government to the source of needed information. According to Professor Paisley, a student of scientific communications, "Probably every scientist has his invisible college in a functional sense."[3] But these are closed societies not available to all seekers of public information. Paisley in describing the workings of a invisible college says it "selects its own society and then shuts the door."[4]

This paper focuses on the formal means for delivering Federal information to everyone everywhere. It sees libraries throughout the nation as the "traditional source of on-demand public information and education",[5] and urges that a national policy for accessing Federal documents and information build

on libraries as national institutions for "providing on-demand information service to those who want it."[6] Specifically this paper views the depository library system as the cornerstone for accessing Federal information throughout the country. After examining some activities of Congress and the agencies to provide more information, and the call of the commissions for improved availability, the paper will propose the depository library system as the access point to Federal information. It will identify weaknesses in the present system needing immediate correction, and then broach a few issues, some significant--others less pressing, that must be faced if the depository system is to have an effective role for information access. Aware of other proposals for revamping the depository system, it neither disagrees with or disputes any reforms leading to better delivery or greater access.[7] But it has a sense of urgency. Emphasizing the short-run, eschewing major re-organization, the suggestions are simple requiring little legislative action and a few determined administrative decisions. Its time frame is tomorrow not the milennium.

ACTIVITIES FOR GREATER ACCESS

Today many agencies are involved in information activities--too many to enumerate. Some have been providing information services to the general public or to special publics as their

primary mission. These agencies have either been assigned by law or have assumed greater responsibility for publicizing their information services. Since 1857, the agency longest involved with information, the Government Printing Office, has been selling and distributing government publications to the public and to libraries. Approximately 30,000 titles are now made available by them to libraries annually. The National Technical Information Service (NTIS) acts as a national clearinghouse and sales agent for technical reports, and other services such as data bases and software programs resulting primarily from the government's research and development efforts. Both the National Referral Center for Science and Technology in the Library of Congress and the Science Information Exchange in the Smithsonian Institution are contact points prepared to give researchers relevant information about agencies, institutions and projects of on-going concern. "To provide a single point in each major metropolitan area for the public to address questions about Federal agencies and receive the desired information,"[8] the General Services Administration under Presidential Order in 1969 established in 40 major cities Federal Information Centers as reference points where citizens could obtain accurate referrals to governmental offices which could best assist them.

Other agencies are making special attempts to improve

information access incidental to their assigned activities. The Office of the Federal Register in the National Archives and Records Service strives to improve the language, composition, and indexing quality of the Federal Register to simplify and improve government regulations by providing more information to the public before decisions are made. Still other agencies engaged in areas of health and social policy have set up clearinghouses to supply assistance and referrals on such specific topics as alcohol and drug abuse.

In a few cases, improved access comes as a by-product of an agency's function. Notable are two information-rich publications of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the General Accounting Office (GAO). In conformity with its administration of Federal Management Circular 74-7 which establishes uniform financial administrative requirements for grants and contractual arrangements, OMB compiles annually with semi-annual updates a Catalog of Domestic Assistance, a government-wide compendium of Federal programs which provide aid and benefits to local governments, groups, organizations, and individuals. It identifies for every program of interest to citizens the types of assistance available, eligibility requirements, program uses and restrictions, agency procedures and guidelines for application.[9] The GAO in line with its

oversight responsibilities under the Congressional Budget Act of 1974 developed the Congressional Sourcebook Series which inventories approximately 1,000 Federal information systems-many unconventional and "in-house," and over 2,000 congressional and administrative reports relating to and evaluating executive programs.[10]

The difficulties of accessing Federal information has prompted Congress to establish national commissions either to study information as a national resource and develop guidance for policy decisions on its allocation, or to resolve more narrow special problems of official information. Stating that ready access to information is indispensible to individual advancement and national growth, the National Commission on Libraries and Information Science (NCLIS) advocates a program to assure basic library and information services, greater availability to the resources of the Federal government, the largest single producer and disseminator of information in the United States.[11] The Commission on Federal Paperwork entrusted to reduce the burden of information collected by the Federal government and maximize its value endorsed a concept of "service management" for public information officials and advanced the notion of a Federal Information Locator System as a comprehensive index able to identify information resources throughout the

Federal government.[12] Other Commissions like the Domestic Council's Committee on the Right to Privacy (National Information Policy Committee) and the National Study Commission on the Records and Documents of Federal Officials (Public Documents Commission) have either exhorted an information policy in the public interest or lend their support to "open government" by advocating the extension of public ownership over records otherwise previously held privately.[13]

Through legislation Congress has also acted to improve access. The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) enacted in 1967 and amended in 1974 broadened the scope of official information available to the public, reversed agencies' past restrictive practices, shifted the burden of proof for the withholding of information on the government, and provided judicial remedies for anyone wrongfully denied access.[14] The FOIA is based upon the presumption that government and its information belongs to the people who are entitled to access and that "need to know" is replaced by "right to know."[15]

Congress in 1974 went a step further and legislated a series of refining procedural and substantive changes to correct 5 years of foot-dragging by the Federal bureaucracy which encouraged even more disclosure than the original statute. In that same year Congress gave the right of privacy comprehensive statutory recognition.[16] Both the Privacy Law and FOIA provide

for greater access to government information. Whereas FOIA is designated to be used by individuals seeking many kinds of information, the Privacy Act is intended to assist individuals in obtaining information about themselves.

After one views the activities of the agencies, reads the recommendations of the national commissions, grapples with the intent of Congress, a suspicion surfaces that the sum of the actions does not add up to greater availability. Are our public officials engaged in symbolic responses to real problems? Unintentionally have they projected a false image of vigorous action to pressing needs in a time of government distrust when such gestures can only generate false hope, disappointment and resentment? Some say there is no lack of an information policy, but that policies in existence are neither coordinated or comprehensive.[17] And so it is with accessibility to Federal documents and information. There are many information policies emerging from Congress and the executive branch providing much information and many avenues for success.

The element missing is the linking institution, ingrained in our culture and available throughout communities of the nation, which has traditionally dispensed public documents and information to the people. The NCLIS report tells us that "local libraries are the first place in the community where people go to find

information."

The depository library system administered by the Government Printing Office provides the nation with a formal organization for making available to the people both Federal documents and federal information. As stated in the law, the basic job of the Federal depository library system is to make "government publications available for the free use of the general public."[18] Located in every state, and Congressional district, and within the reach of most communities, national information policies intended to improve access to Federal government resources could build on their strength as a natural service point, correct their weaknesses, and enrich their resources and services permitting them to become the local conduits to Federal information.

DEPOSITORY LIBRARY SYSTEM--A FORMAL ACCESS

The depository library system, the oldest government-wide information service, dates from 1857 and has evolved into a network of approximately 50 regional libraries acting as nodes backing up 1200 selective libraries. Although some libraries are named depositories by law, most are designated by members of Congress and, therefore, are located in every state and Congressional district of the nation.

Efforts to strengthen the depository system parallels

NCLIS's objective for a basic minimum of library service in all communities.[19] Depository libraries are available to everyone throughout the nation in line with standards of services stressing availability of public information developed by the Government Printing Office and Depository Council to the Public Printer. NCLIS also views the states as building blocks in the national program and encourages the reinforcing of state-wide resources. In the depository library system, state library authorities often exert influences in the designating of libraries. In about forty states, in fact, the state library itself is the regional node supplementing the services of local depositories.

The depository libraries are, however, not without limitations. Many of these are attributable not to the system per se but to the Federal government's growth, diversification, and transformations since 1857 when the national government was a simplier congressional state. Government information then was largely congressional documents issued as Senate and House reports, and the Government Printing Office, a Congressional agency, could control their production and delivery. After two world wars, a major economic depression, and public policy involvements in social programs and the advancement of science and technology, the Federal government was transformed in the ensuing years into

a complicated bureaucratic state administratively and politically decentralized. Parallel innovations of formats and delivery modes in information technology outpaced the capabilities of a document depository program established in 1857 for distribution of Congress's printing.

These developments give insight into two basic weaknesses limiting the public document and information delivery capability of depository libraries. Each presents its own set of problems which Congress and the executive branch must resolve in the interest of a national public information policy and a larger role for depositories libraries as local service points. First, an explanation of specific weaknesses and explorations for corrective measures, then a consideration of some larger issues involved in strengthening the depositories role as local access points to Federal information.

WEAKNESSES AND LIMITS

Non-GPO documentation. Because of the decentralization in the Federal Government, the Government Printing Office is unable to handle all government's printing. As a result, a large number of executive publications--estimated as high as 60% are not printed by the official printer but are, in fact, produced in a decentralized pattern throughout the Federal government and beyond the immediate control of GPO and, therefore, not regularly

distributed to depository libraries.

The Depository Act of 1962 recognized this void and directed Federal agencies to furnish the Superintendent of Documents "a copy of every document issued or published by them...not confidential in character" in order that GPO could notify the public of their existence by listing them in the "comprehensive" index of public documents, the Monthly Catalog of United States Government Publications.[20] Since the agencies must bear the cost of additional copies for depository libraries, they have little incentive to either cooperate or abide by the law. GPO until recently has not been adament in its enforcement.

Last year, the Congressional Joint Committee on Printing authorized the GPO microfiche program whereby GPO would procure "non-GPO" publications, film them, and offer them to depository libraries, bringing these fugitive documents into the mainstream of public document distribution. Applauded by depository librarians, the actual extent and success of the program remains to be seen having become embroiled in a contest between government and commercial publishers who have been marketing these publications. This issue will be discussed later in the paper. The microfiche program could go a long way toward correcting a basic weakness and make for greater availability throughout the nation.

Administrative/Operational/Cooperative Publications. Another weakness for the depository system is the provision in the 1962 law exempting distribution of operational publications of an internal nature. The provision covers documents of a working nature, procedural manuals, directives, memoranda not deemed of sufficient "informational" value to warrant availability.[21] Few dispute the reasoning of the section, but one suspects agency misuse of the provision by withholding publications of general interest for convenience and budgetary reasons.

Remedial measures could be made at the agency level. Public information officers should be wary of restrictive agency practices and decide the internalness of a publication in the interests of freedom of information and the "public's right to know" and promote wider dissemination including distribution to depository libraries. Environmental Impact Statements, as a case in point, although often a working communication are hardly internal to the public concerned. How many documents librarians have heard a patron's reply," you're a depository for government documents, aren't you" to an unfilled request for an "internal' document publicized in a newspaper or on the evening news. If the material has been publicized, and is newsworthy, and unrestricted for reasons of

security or personal privacy, it is then "informational" and within the purview of the definition in the depository law. Otherwise "internal" publications or classes of such material and should be described in the agency's index required by the Freedom of Information Act.

Cooperative publications are also exempt from depository distribution. Predominately these include the technical reports from the National Technical Information Service (NTIS), private contractors, and selected titles of the Library of Congress, and the National Archives--publications which must be sold in order to financially sustain the agency or a trust fund.

Many documents librarians argue that NTIS reports as government documents be available free to depository libraries. In considering the relationship of its findings to the Federal depository library program the Public Documents Commission summarized the dispute.

> Most documents containing technical information either produced by private agencies under Government contract, or prepared by Federal agencies, remain outside the depository system... NTIS does not participate in Depository Library Program, holding that the Act creating the Service provides the public cannot bear the cost of its publications. Libraries, however, assert that NTIS can and should participate in the Depository Library Program because the same act states that NTIS can freely distribute information "for the general benefit of the public."[22]

In 1975 the Comptroller-General decided in an advisory opinion that most NTIS publications are "Cooperative" publications and may legally be excluded from depository distribution, but added that certain publications are "issued primarily for the general benefit of the public" and are, therefore, subject to the act.[23] NTIS has within recent years made available free to depository libraries those indexes, catalogs, and guides such as Government Reports Announcements, and the Directory of Computerized Data Files and Related Software which provide bibliographic and descriptive assistance criticial to identifying a document, making a referral, or purchasing.

When a library decides to purchase, the pricing of cooperative publications presents another set of problems. NTIS appears insensitive to the impact of rising costs on library budgets.[24] Subordinating its official clearinghouse role to its need for self-sustaining finances, NTIS has escalated the prices of reports so that they are available only to the wealthier libraries and beyond the reach of most depository libraries.

The self-sufficiency of the agency is at the expense of the general accessibility of the public. The practice, in effect, denies the publics of these libraries access to the results of Federal research. It seems appropriate for NTIS

to develop a pricing scale for depository libraries conforming to the recommendations of a recent GAO report that its chartering legislation intended self-sufficiency to be a secondary objective, and that the collecting and dessominating of scientific, technical, and engineering information is the major objective of the NTIS program.[25]

--ISSUES

If the depository libraries are to mature from collections of limited documents into modern switching centers and referral services to come closer to meet the widening diversity of the needs of the public, national policies must come to grips with certain issues.

Public Sector/Private Sector Relationships

Most notable of these for depository libraries is the reconciliation of the relationship between the private and public sectors in the production, publication and dissemination of public information. The basic question is which sector will produce and distribute government information. The problem is complex, and policies reflected in laws and administrative directives are often contradictory. The commission offer little help. The National Information Policy report sees information as "the raw material of knowledge and, therefore,

an essential part of modern, economic, political, and social life... as a commodity in its own right.[26] And NCLIS applauded the "initiatives taken in the private sector to develop new user supported services" as a valuable contribution to the National Program.[27] But the Public Documents Commission endorses public production and distribution coinciding with the depository system's philosophy of free access.[28]

Without doubt private companies are rendering a vital bibliographic service to libraries including depository libraries by indexing government publications and providing a document delivery service in microfiche for "difficult to obtain publications." Securities and Exchange Commission's IOK reports, Congressional committee prints, non-GPO statistical publications, declassified documents, and Federal environmental impact statements are all examples of "hard to get" publications available through private sources. Sensing a need on the part of the public to find its way through the bureaucracy in order to take advantage of legislation such as the Freedom of Information Act, publishers are issuing directories such as Federal Executive Directory, the Federal Yellow Book, and Researchers Guide to Washington which identify agencies, officers, field offices, and information contacts.[29]

Many librarians, particularly documents librarians, unable

to afford many of these services and government officials argue the case for the public sector attesting that the public has paid once for its information and should not be charged again. Relying on the spirit of the depository law and Freedom of Information, they promote "free" and "inexpensive" information.

The controversy sharpens when focused on the GPO Microfiche Program. At least two private publishers have been engaged in supplying microfiche copies of non-GPO produced government publications to libraries and see the program as an economic threat. Both NCLIS and the National Information Policy Report urge guidelines for agencies to follow for the use of the private sector in disseminating public information.

Whatever the resolution it must be in the interest of the depository system as the public's access recognizing it as a public service not as a pawn caught between two competing interests. An option accommodating the private sector could be GPO contracting with a private publisher to supply the Non-GPO documents in microform to regional and selected research libraries. The overriding concern must be the vitality of the depository system as the citizens' access to Federal information.

Coordination and Standardization for Referral

During the hearings on the Freedom of Information Act, the

representative of Common Cause told the Congressional subcommittee

> If the existence of a document is unknown, disclosure of its contents will never be requested.[30]

This is true of all information resources--published documents as well as records, archives, and machine readable files. Agencies should describe in an unclouded fashion their many information resources in published current guides, catalogs, and indexes permitting depository libraries to identify resources in their collection, available in other libraries or make a referral to the proper agency.

As for conventional publications, the OMB's Catalog of Domestic Assistance which features publications pertinent to government programs and the GAO's Recurring Reports to Congress and Federal Evaluation Reports in the Congressional Sourcebook Series,[31] for example, could provide better bibliographic descriptions for easier retrieval, and overcome the difficulty of determining if the publication is a public document of general availability, a Senate or House report, an in-house procedural manual or an informal communication to Congress of limited obtainability. Similiarly, guides to non-conventional materials such as agencies records, data files, and software products should exhibit standards for description

and completeness. NTIS's Directory of Computerized Data Files, Software and Related Technical Reports is a catalog providing sufficient elements for referral or procurement. Each reference to a data file has an identifying title, a date, name of the generating agency, notes about the number of tapes in each file, the density of tapes, the number of tracks, and the coding structure. Vivian Sessions sees it as a "reapproachement" between primary and secondary data base professionals.[32]

Completeness and frequency should also be requisites for agencies' resource guides. The National Archives and Records Service could consider issuing the Guide to the National Archives, the Catalog of Microfiche Publications and the Catalog of Machine-Readable Records as one integrated source in a current updated loose-leaf format. In developing standards for description, public information officers perhaps working through interagency committees should become familiar with the efforts of the Association of Records Managers, American Society of Archivists, the American Library Association's Subcommittee on Machine Readable Data Files, and the Association of Public Data Users. These professionals, infused with the Federal Paperwork Commission's call for a new philosophy of "service management,"[33] should recognize information as a significant resource vital to maximizing program effectiveness and be mindful

of depository libraries' needs to fill the public's requests for all varieties and formats of information called into service by anyone anywhere in the country.

In general, many agencies could greatly improve accessibility by observing the indexing provision of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) which requires

> Each agency shall promptly publish, quarterly or more frequently, and distribute (by sales or otherwise) copies of each index or supplement...[34]

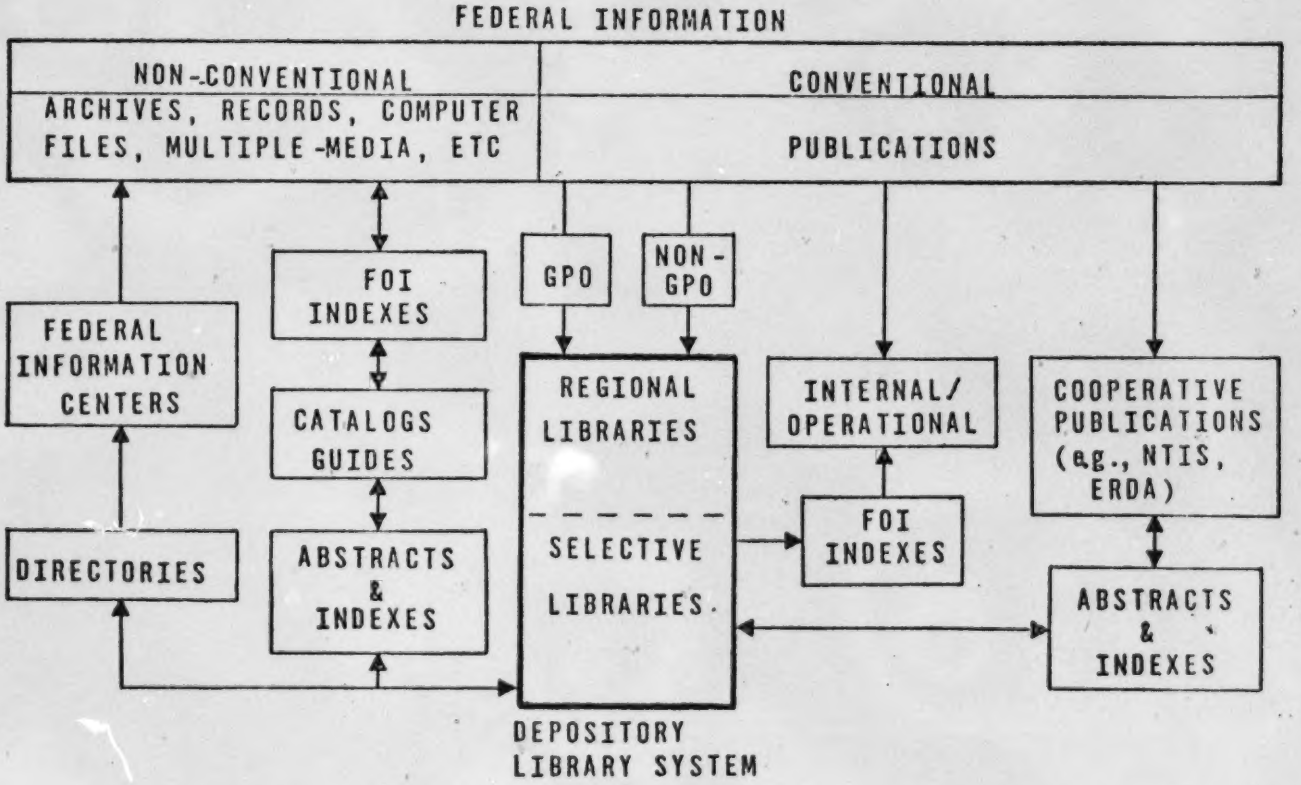
While the language of the Act does not define or describe an acceptable index, the legislative history infers that it be in "usable and concise" form.[35] In compliance with FOIA, the Federal Register compiles and publishes quarterly a guide to agencies indexes. From a review of the guide, one suspects that agencies for convenience or budgetary reasons are eluding the intent of the law. Without indexes, servicably constructed, depository libraries are often frustrated in attempting to identify records and class of materials not readily available but often requested by information seekers. The General Accounting Office should review agencies compliance and advance the general usefulness of the indexes for the public and the referral capability for depository libraries.

Expanded Congressional Services for Depository Libraries

Congress, like some state legislatures, must recognize the depository libraries as a communication link to its constituents, and provide them with automated-information resources rendering more timely and current information of public interest. Specifically the Congressional Research Services (CRS) Legislative Information and Legislative Issues Data Bases dealing with legislative actions and issues of major concern to constituents and updated daily permits a user to locate quickly the current status and background of congressional bills.[36] Essentially containing the contents of the printed Digest of General Public Bills and Resolutions whose untimeliness and multi-supplemented format has compromised its usefulness, the computer-based Legislative Information Data Base monitors each bill through Congress affording retrieval by more than 20 elements including bill number, sponsor, committee, subject. Whereas, Legislative Issues provides background and analyses of current issues, congressional actions, chronology of significant events, and sources for additional references.

Arguments about the costs of telecommunications should not hinder delivery. Again a number of options are available. Regional depositories and large research libraries could connect to Congress through a commercial carrier or the

Federal telecommunications system (FTS) while smaller depositories could receive the service in Computer Output Microfiche (COM) as is done in a few states.[37] In either way information vital to an informed citizenry would be delivered into every congressional district of the nation to the public through their local depository libraries.



DEPOSITORY LIBRARIES IN A MODERN CONTEXT AS SWITCHING CENTERS FOR FEDERAL INFORMATION

SUMMARY

Federal information is varied and complex and not easily and equitably available to everyone. Despite efforts of agencies, Congress, and national commissions to improve access, citizens are still confused and frustrated in obtaining public information. National information policy should recognize the depository library system as the public's natural and traditional access point to Federal information. Available to most communities, its weaknesses inherited from the past should be corrected and its delivery potential improved for the present. Certain issues of public policy and administrative laxness and indecision impairing depository libraries effectiveness should be resolved in the interest of public information accessibility. Congress should view these libraries as a link with its constituents and enhance the services. Cast in a new role, depository libraries could not only provide publications but switch and refer inquirers to other Federal information resources.

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